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Enviro-Safe blast injures four, rips building

Investigations began quickly Tuesday in the wake of a powerful blast that tore through the aging brick walls and roof of a chemical pressure-bottling plant and injured four workers, three seriously.

Shortly after 3 p.m., a corner of the Enviro-Safe Refrigerants plant at 100 Caroline St. blew off in the explosion that reportedly took place near an assembly line and may have stemmed from a gas line malfunction.

While identities of the injured remained unavailable Tuesday night, two of the three listed in serious condition are a 57-year-old woman and a 50-year-old man who were transferred by Life Flight helicopter to the burn unit at OSF Saint Anthony Medical Center in Rockford.

The third, a 52-year-old man, remained at OSF Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria with a 45-year-old woman listed in fair condition, a hospital spokeswoman said.

All suffered burns "on various parts of their bodies," the spokeswoman said.

Other workers at the plant evacuated quickly from its rear doors, coughing and wheezing, said nearby resident John Gordon.

"It's surprising we don't have more people hurt than we do," police Public Information Officer Don Jolly said at the scene. "There's a lot of damage to the building."

Fire trucks and ambulances raced to the site in one of the city's oldest areas just north of downtown. Jolly said police, concerned about a serious chemical or gaseous leak, initially considered evacuating nearby homes.

After an initial smoky cloud and dust from the explosion cleared, however, those concerns dissipated, he said.

The explosion reportedly came in an assembly line area of the one-story building, a former distillery.

Initial investigation at the scene included the possibility of a malfunctioning gas line that, fed by an unknown ignition source, produced the explosion.

Local entrepreneur Randy Price converted the "century-old" structure into a bottling facility for his company that produces environmentally safe refrigerants in several renovated buildings in the city.

Price said it was too early Tuesday night to talk about the explosion's possible cause. He will continue working with investigators today to review what security cameras in the building recorded, he said.

"I don't want to hide anything," Price said. "It's all sort of sickening. I'm just glad it wasn't worse than it was and that nobody was killed."

His company took a hard jolt. "Seventeen years' worth of work just went down the tubes," with an upcoming season of business with companies "around the globe" now gone.

"I'm not going to quit" and close Enviro-Safe, Price said. "I'm the type of guy who's going to rebuild."

The blast appeared confined, but powerfully, to the southeast corner of the V-shaped building. Bricks from that section's upper wall fell in piles to the ground along and between railroad tracks running next to the building. Shattered glass and frames from four windows flew more than 30 feet.

"It was a big kaboom," that Gordon, 66, said he heard from inside his house at 127 Caroline about 50 yards from the building.

"I always figured since they started (the bottling operation) that this might happen, after seeing all those tanks outside for the refrigerant," he said.

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PHOTO/ JOSH BRADSHAW / TIMES STAFF

Structural damage to Enviro-Safe is visible following an explosion Tuesday afternoon that injured multiple people.

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